

A history of pottery



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The production of pottery is one of the most ancient arts. The oldest known body of pottery dates from the Jomon period (from about 10, 500 to 400 BC) in Japan; and even the earliest Jomon ceramics exhibit a unique sophistication of technique and design. Excavations in the Near East have revealed that primitive fired-clay vessels were made there more than 8, 000 years ago. Potters were working in Iran by about 5500 BC, and earthenware was probably being produced even earlier on the Iranian high plateau. Chinese potters had developed characteristic techniques by about 5000 BC. In the New World many pre-Columbian American cultures developed highly artistic pottery traditions.

TYPES OF WARES

Pottery comprises three distinctive types of wares. The first type, earthenware, has been made following virtually the same techniques since ancient times; only in the modern era has mass production brought changes in materials and methods. Earthenware is basically composed of clay—often blended clays—and baked hard, the degree of hardness depending on the intensity of the heat. After the invention of glazing, earthenwares were coated with glaze to render them waterproof; sometimes glaze was applied decoratively. It was found that, when fired at great heat, the clay body became nonporous. This second type of pottery, called stoneware, came to be preferred for domestic use.

The third type of pottery is a Chinese invention that appeared when feldspathic material in a fusible state was incorporated in a stoneware composition. The ancient Chinese called decayed feldspar kaolin (meaning “

high place,” where it was originally found); this substance is known in the West as china clay. Petuntse, or china stone, a less decayed, more fusible feldspathic material, was also used in Chinese porcelain; it forms a white cement that binds together the particles of less fusible kaolin. Significantly, the Chinese have never felt that high-quality porcelain must be either translucent or white. Two types of porcelain evolved: “true” porcelain, consisting of a kaolin hard-paste body, extremely glassy and smooth, produced by high temperature firing, and soft porcelain, invariably translucent and lead glazed, produced from a composition of ground glass and other ingredients including white clay and fired at a low temperature. The latter was widely produced by 18th-century European potters.

It is believed that porcelain was first made by Chinese potters toward the end of the Han period (206 BC-AD 220), when pottery generally became more refined in body, form, and decoration. The Chinese made early vitreous wares (protoporcelain) before they developed their white vitreous ware (true porcelain) that was later so much admired by Europeans.

Regardless of time or place, basic pottery techniques have varied little except in ancient America, where the potter’s wheel was unknown. Among the requisites of success are correct composition of the clay body by using balanced materials; skill in shaping the wet clay on the wheel or pressing it into molds; and, most important, firing at the correct temperature. The last operation depends vitally on the experience, judgment, and technical skill of the potter.

DECORATING TECHNIQUES

In the course of their long history potters have used many decorating techniques. Among the earliest, impressing and incising of wares are still favored. Ancient potters in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, northern India, and the high regions of Central Asia (where primitive terra-cotta figures associated with religious cults were produced) frequently decorated wares with impressed or incised designs. A notable incising technique developed more recently was that of Korean potters working in the Koryo period (918-1392). These artisans began by ornamenting their celadon wares with delicately incised and impressed patterns and later developed elaborate inlaying by filling incised lines with colored slip (semiliquid clay). Black and white slip was used most effectively for inlaying colored porcelains. Decoration of this sort generally depends more on the skill of the artisan than on the complexity of the tools being used.

An especially popular type of decoration involved the sgraffito, or “scratched,” technique used by Italian potters before the 15th century. This technique, which is thought to have reached Italy from the Near East, was probably derived from China, where it was first used during the Song (Sung) dynasty (960-1279). By the 16th century Italian potters working mainly in Padua and Bologna had developed great skill in sgraffito, which entailed the incising of designs on red or buff earthenware that had been coated with ordinary transparent lead glaze, usually toned yellow or, sometimes, brown, copper, or green. After firing, the wares were dipped into white clay slip so that a dark pattern could be cut on the surface. By cutting through the white slip, the artist produced a design on the exposed red or buff body. Pigments

were also sometimes applied. After a further coating of lead glaze the ware was fired a second time.

A sound knowledge of glazes—both utilitarian and decorative—is vital to the potter. The origin of glazes and glazing techniques is unknown, but the fine lustrous glazes developed in China surely began with a simple glaze that served to cover earthenware and render it watertight. Chinese potters used two kinds of glazes, one composed basically of feldspar, and another produced by fusing silica of quartz or sand by means of a flux, generally of lead oxide.

Chinese potters regarded glazes and glazing techniques as having prime importance; under the Han emperors they made great efforts to improve this technology. The use of lead glaze increased, and wood ash was incorporated to impart a dullish brown or gray green coloring, somewhat blotchy and occasionally iridescent. These effects were entirely natural, as no coloring matter was added to the composition. Glazing techniques were modified under successive dynasties. Colored glazes were developed and used to brilliant effect by Tang (T'ang) and Song potters, and a great diversity of brightly hued wares appeared over the centuries.

Many connoisseurs feel that the pure white porcelain, called blanc de chine, which first appeared during the Ming dynasty, is the most serenely beautiful of all Chinese ceramics. Dehua (Te-hua) potters in Fujian (Fukien) province, working during the 17th century, produced their blanc de chine masterpieces in the purest white porcelain coated with a thick white glaze.

Salt glaze, used by English potters during the early 1700s, may well have been known to the Chinese but was not used by them. Near Eastern potters glazed wares in ancient times. Potters in Mesopotamia and Iran commonly used an alkaline glaze made of quartz mixed with sodium and potassium. An admixture of colored metallic oxides, mostly lead, was introduced later.

Painting on pottery and porcelain became richly colorful in many regions and periods. Decorative brush painting directly on the baked clay reached its zenith in China during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), whose artists were highly skilled at painting in fired colors. For a long period Chinese ceramic artists had used only black or brown pigment to decorate wares that were then covered with clear glaze. It is believed that the appearance in China of 13th-century brush-decorated wares from Persia sparked a change. These works, painted in blue cobalt under the glaze, inspired the brushwork of the Chinese and the resulting so-called blue-and-white style.

Ming artists also excelled in painting over the glaze, using brilliant enamel colors. The overglaze technique, which evolved over two centuries, demanded correct preparation of the enamels, skill in application, and the proper (low) firing temperature. The overglaze enamel decorations executed during the reign of Chenghua (1465-87), which were never surpassed in China, incorporated flowers, foliage, and figure subjects against backgrounds of arabesques and scrollwork. Designs enclosed within dark blue outlines were filled in with brilliant color. Enamel decoration of superb quality was also executed in Japan during the Edo period (1615-1868) by celebrated artists and potters of the caliber of Kenzan, Kakiemon, and Ninsei.

In the ancient Aegean the potter's art developed continuously from the Neolithic period and through the periods of the Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations, culminating, in ancient Greece, in a unique type of painted pottery, which reached its height between the 6th and 4th centuries BC. The finest Greek pottery, especially Attic vases, was exquisitely proportioned and often decorated with finely painted relief work. Unlike artisans in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Persia, the Attic potters did not apply heavy glaze to their wares. The unique gloss commonly seen on Attic pottery and similar wares made elsewhere in Greece still baffles those who have tried to determine its formula and method of application. Neither a glaze nor a varnish, it is more marked on some areas, such as those painted black, than on others. Some experts conjecture that it may be attributed to illite or a similar clay mineral in a weak solution that was thinly applied to the surface of wares or mixed into the black " paint" used by the artists.

In the Islamic world ceramic decorative art flowered with the creation of a great diversity of painted wares. Painted luster decoration on pottery originated in Mesopotamia and spread to ancient Egypt; later, under Islam in Persia, this type of decoration on white-glazed wares became incredibly brilliant. Islamic luster-painted wares were later imitated by Italian potters during the Renaissance.

MAJOR TRADITIONS IN THE WEST

After the fall of the ancient Roman Empire potters in Europe produced little other than repetitive utilitarian wares until the end of the Middle Ages.

Earthenware

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A distinctive type of earthenware known as majolica, which was derived from Chinese porcelain, appeared in Italy during the last quarter of the 14th century. It is now believed that this type of painted earthenware was inspired by the Hispano-Moresque luster-decorated ware of Spanish origin introduced to Italy by Majorcan seagoing traders.

Majolica ware, whether thrown on the wheel or pressed into molds, was fired once to obtain a brown or buff body, then dipped in glaze composed of lead and tin oxide with a silicate of potash. The opaque glaze presented a surface that was suitable to receive decoration. A second firing after decoration fixed the white glaze to the body and the pigments to the glaze, so that the colors became permanently preserved. Frequently, the beauty of these wares was increased by dipping them in a translucent lead glaze composed of oxide of lead mixed with sand, potash, and salt. When certain luster pigments and enamels were used in all-over painting, wares had to be specially fired at low temperature. Application of metallic luster pigments required great skill because these colors were extremely volatile and needed special handling.

Luca della Robbia (see della Robbia, family) did not, as has been held, invent the enamel tin-glazing process; nevertheless, his work raised majolica production from a craft to high art in Italy. Not only did he use blue and white enamels in decorative work, but, as a sculptor, he also used the majolica technique to add brilliance to the surface of his productions. By the beginning of the 15th century Italian potters had abandoned the old familiar processes, and a revolution in style and techniques was under way. The severe style as followed principally in the school of Tuscany continued to the end of the 15th century, but rules and principles slackened until the inclusion

of human figures in designs, previously frowned upon, was accepted. At the end of the 15th century Faenza became the thriving center of a reinvigorated pottery industry in Italy. A new, rich decorative style, known as istoriato, fired the imagination of potters, reaching its zenith in the workshops of Urbino.

In early 17th-century England attractive slipwares were produced, including the slip-decorated earthenware that was a speciality of the Toft family of potters. A kind of tin-glazed earthenware was also produced in the Netherlands, principally at Delft, beginning in the mid-17th century. Termed delftware, it was among the first European wares to be decorated with motifs inspired by Chinese and Japanese models.

Continental Porcelains

Eventually, European potters, who much admired the porcelain of the Far East, attempted to imitate it, but the formula remained elusive. Francesco de Medici, grand duke of Tuscany, produced an inferior type of soft-paste porcelain in his Florence workshop during the 16th century. In March 1709, Augustus II of Saxony announced that his ceramist Johann Bottger (1682-1719) had discovered how to make porcelain. The first European royal porcelain manufactory was consequently established at Meissen (see Meissen ware) near Dresden, Germany. Throughout the century following the discovery of the porcelain formula—when, despite the utmost precautions at Meissen, the secret leaked out—many rival factories were set up in Europe. Germany, Austria, Italy, France, and England soon had factories engaged in the production of wares much like those of Meissen.

Porcelain figures were first produced in Meissen as table ornaments; the earliest examples were formed as part of sweetmeat dishes. Many splendid wares issued from the royal factory, but none were more admired than the finely modeled and decorated porcelain figures imitated by almost every German, Austrian, Italian, and English factory of note. Widespread interest in figures of both pottery and porcelain has continued to the present. Johann Joachim Kandler (1706-75), a master modeler, was the most notable of the artisans engaged in this work at Meissen and rivaled the famous Franz Anton Bustelli (1723-63) of Nymphenburg (see Nymphenburg ware).

The methods used to produce porcelain figures as developed by Kandler imparted a new dimension to the art. German porcelain figures were usually produced from molds, which, in turn, were cast from an original master model made of wax, clay, or, occasionally, wood. The use of molds facilitated unlimited reproduction. Because the figures shrank during firing, allowances had to be made in their sizes; they were also provided with a small venthole in the back or base to permit excess heated air to escape. Because different factories placed these holes differently, their positions help determine the provenance and authenticity of given pieces. When considerable undercutting was necessary, porcelain figures were usually made in sections, using separate molds. Portions of elaborate groups and single figures were later joined by a specially trained assembler (known as a "repairer") who usually worked from a master model.

Europe's second hard-paste porcelain factory began operations at Vienna in 1717. In the late 1700s at the royal Sevres (see Sevres ware) factory in France, potters experimented until they developed a remarkably white,
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finely textured body. Sevres wares were painted in unique colors that no other European factory could duplicate. The bleu de roi and rose Pompadour of Sevres wares captivated all Europe and, with the products of Meissen and Vienna, inspired English potters.

English Wares

The finest English porcelain—both soft- and hard-paste—was made between about 1745 and 1775. The first English porcelain was probably produced at Chelsea (see Chelsea ware) under Charles Gouyn, but his successor Nicholas Sprimont, a Flemish silversmith who took over management in 1750, was responsible for the high-quality wares, especially the superb figures, for which the factory became famous. Factories at Worcester (see Worcester ware), Bow, and Derby also produced wares that rival those of the Continent.

Led by the ambitious, energetic, and enterprising Josiah Wedgwood and his successors at the Etruria factory, English potters in the late 18th and early 19th centuries became resourceful and inventive. Wedgwood's contributions consisted mainly of a much improved creamware, his celebrated jasperware, so-called black basalt, and a series of fine figures created by famous modelers and artists. After Wedgwood, other potters of the first half of the 19th century developed a number of new wares. Of these, Parian ware was the most outstanding and commercially successful.

The name of this ware was derived from Paros, the Greek island from which sculptors in ancient times obtained the creamy or ivory-tinted marble that Parian ware resembled. The first examples of this new product, described as “statuary porcelain,” issued from Copeland and Garret's factory in 1842 and

were immediately acclaimed. Two varieties of Parian ware were produced: statuary parian, used in the making of figures and reproductions of sculpture, and hard-paste, or standard, parian, from which hollowware was made. Statuary parian, incorporating a glassy frit, is classified as soft porcelain. Standard parian, with a greater proportion of feldspar in the composition but no frit, is hard porcelain. Early parian statuary was ivory-tinted due to the presence of iron in the feldspar devoid of iron silicate. Suitable deposits were eventually located in Sweden and Ireland. Both English and American potters either obtained details of the original formula or worked out their own, and the resulting production of Parian wares on both sides of the Atlantic was enormous.

Among the most beautiful and successful wares invented by 19th-century potters were those decorated in what came to be known in England as *pate-sur-pate*, a paste-on-paste technique devised sometime after 1870 by Marc-Louis Solon (1835-1913) of Minton's in England. *Pate-sur-pate*, involving both modeling and painting techniques, was stained Parian ware decorated with reliefs in translucent tinted or white slip, the colors being laid one upon the other. Solon was inspired by a Chinese celadon case decorated with embossed flowers that he had admired in the museum at Sevres, where he worked for a time. At first his slip painting on biscuit porcelain simply peeled off; he was successful, however, when he applied layers of slip to a damp surface. Minton wares decorated with *pate-sur-pate* became the most costly and coveted ceramic ornaments produced in England in the last quarter of the 19th century. Only a few English potters mastered Solon's complex

technique, although the work of his pupil, Alboin Birks, rivaled that of the master.

20th-Century Developments

By the late 19th century, with the development of machinery and the introduction of new technologies, the age of mass production dawned and the potter's art consequently suffered. Western ceramic wares declined markedly in quality of materials and decoration. Florid designs, gaudy coloring, and inartistic shapes became fashionable, and the resulting decadence continued into the 20th century. Not until the 1930s were signs of revival in the form and decoration of ceramics discernible, principally in the productions of artist-potters who were active in Western Europe and the United States. Many of these artist-potters arrived at their innovations by way of continuous experiment with materials and techniques. Others sought inspiration from primitive types of Japanese pottery or in the forms of ancient American Indian traditions. Since the end of World War II the design and decoration of ceramics in both Europe and the United States, especially ornamental wares, has been largely influenced by individual artist-artisans. Commercial products, such as tablewares, have tended to reflect the styles and patterns developed by these potters, whose work has often shown striking originality.